

The Pheasant-Hunting Alternative

by Steve Smith

We are dealing with a sad story here, one we have not had to contemplate since the 1985 Farm Bill, and the Conservation Reserve Program it created, came into being: There are not going to be as many pheasants nor places to hunt them as there has been for the past 23 years; CRP acres are being pulled out of the program by the millions, and those that are left, too often are being grazed or hayed. What I just wrote and what follows is, of course, conjecture because we don't know how things are going to play out. But please don't get discouraged and stop reading – depending on your point of view, it may not as dark as we think.

You may not agree with this, but with corn for ethanol and some other crops at an all-time market high, and with a significant percentage of the world's population unable to get enough to eat, I am afraid that the days of being able to count on millions of acres of farmland being set aside to grow grass – and pheasants and quail – are over. It is a luxury no one can any longer afford. There will be some hunt-able land left in CRP, waterways and areas of fragile soils, but the acres they occupy will be far less than what we've been used to. We have lived through the pheasant boom, and I hope you raised and trained and hunted with and buried a few good dogs during that time. I did.

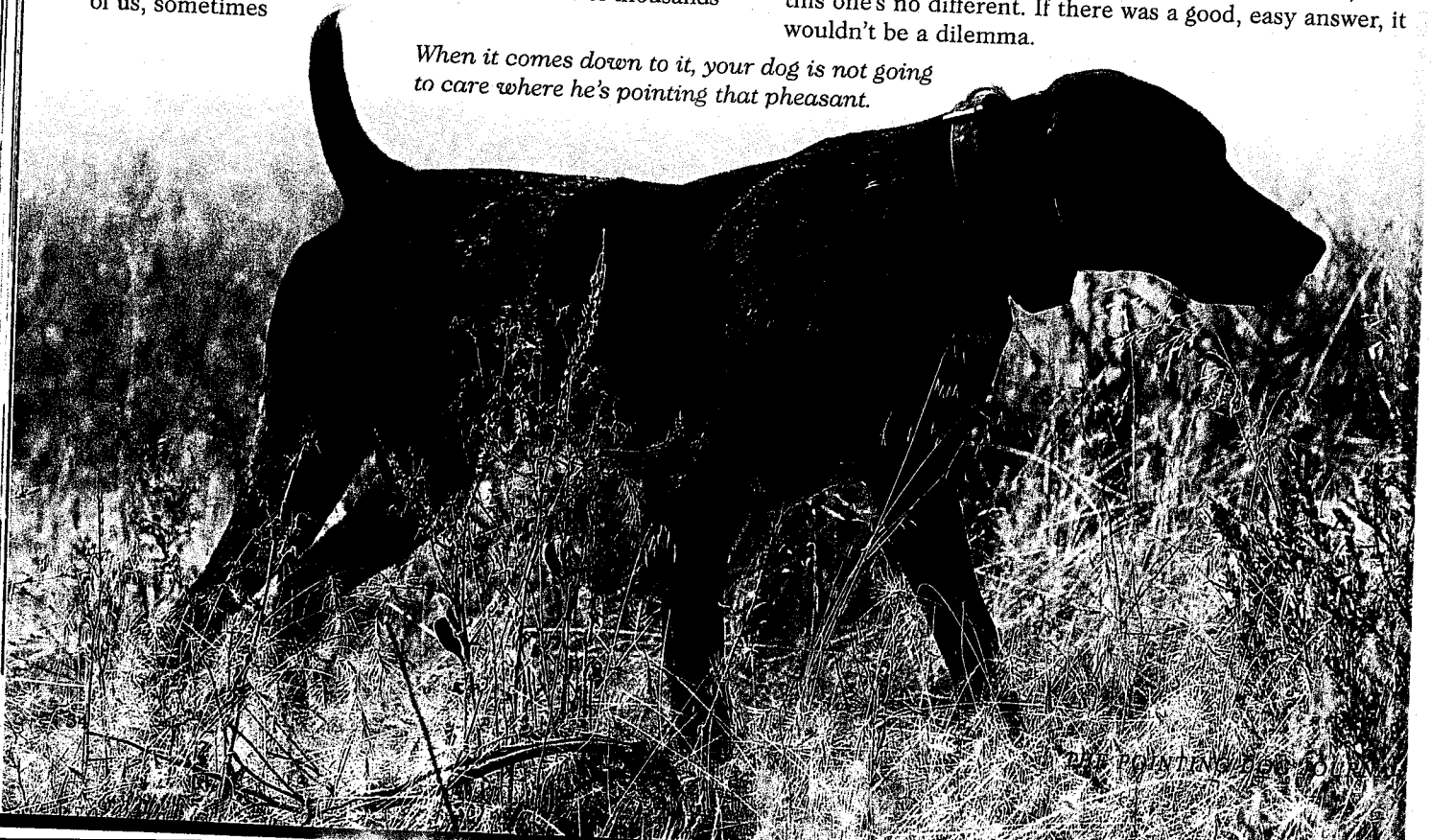
The annual trip to the prairies of the upper Midwest, during those years, became a tradition for tens of thousands of us, sometimes

more than one trip and more than one state. We got to know certain farmers like they were family, certain motels and restaurants like they were our homes, certain sleepy little towns like we were born and raised there. To be sure, The Trip became more than a chance to see and hunt and enjoy flocks of pheasants. But it was for the pheasants, and to a lesser extent bobwhites, that we went and went again. Oh sure, I know – the vast majority of upland hunters *don't* make a pilgrimage anywhere; many never go and have never gone anyplace except our home states. But a large number do, and those are the ones who don't like what's happening.

Of course, even if CRP were still in full flower, getting there, which used to be half the fun, would end up being half the expense; \$3.50-\$4 gasoline, maybe higher by the time you read this, will do that, especially if you're young, your family is young, and The Trip budget was often tight to begin with. I know a few hunters who skipped The Trip when gas went to \$2.25 a gallon – ah, for \$2 gas again.... So we have a dilemma: Sure, it'll be expensive, but the land and the birds won't be there like they were.

What can we do, if anything? To every dilemma, of course, there is always a list of less-than-satisfactory answers and tough choices, and this one's no different. If there was a good, easy answer, it wouldn't be a dilemma.

When it comes down to it, your dog is not going to care where he's pointing that pheasant.





1. **Quit hunting.** Worst possible solution, and of course we won't do that. The dog won't allow it.
2. **Go anyway.** Suck it up, pay the money, take a chance you'll be able to find a place to hunt; if nothing else, there ought to be fewer other hunters competing for the same places, and the chances are this year will still be pretty good.
3. **Switch your focus.** Like to a different species of bird; many have already decided to do just that, to find out what this sharptail and Hun' culture is all about. Of course, depending on where you live, the drive and expense could be even more than going to the eastern Dakotas.
4. **Stay home and hunt local pheasants.** Especially if you live in a marginal state – Wisconsin, New York, Michigan. We've even done a story on this, and it's a good alternative for many of us who gave up hunting pheasants at home when the bird populations boomed elsewhere.
5. **Spend time at a shooting preserve.** You knew I would get around to this one eventually.

Shooting preserves get rapped for a number of reasons; let's look at some basic objections and address them.

I'll never pay for hunting, period. If it's a matter of principle and not dollars and cents, there's nothing we can do about that. The only thing I would say is that hunting (and fishing) is about the only hugely popular recreational activity in the country that a large percentage of its participants expect to

be able to do for free. Look, I bought these golf clubs, bought the shoes, paid for lessons... I'll be dipped if I'm going to pay someone to let me play, too!

I really prefer to hunt wild birds. Don't we all? And some of us will never set foot on a preserve except to do a little dog training. But let me tell you a short story. About 12 years ago, I was in South Dakota with the late Dave Meisner, hunting near Chamberlain. It was early December, wild birds, and the birds were very wild. We were working a wide strip of standing corn with knee-high grass, not much chance to get dog work, but that's where the birds were.

As we approached the end of the field, the pheasants started coming up by the dozens. Two roosters flushed almost at my feet, and I dropped both, a rarity in itself, quickly reloaded, and shot a late-flushing bird, to both my and the pheasant's surprise. My three-bird limit complete, I turned to Meisner, who had shot a bird himself and missed another, to gloat, and he said, "Think how [word universally recognized to mean upset, irritated, or irked] we'd be if we were at a shooting preserve and these were released birds." It's funny, I think you'll agree – wild birds, plenty of them, and easy shots, and it's memorable hunting, though over too soon. Same exact scene at a shooting preserve, and it's too tame. Humans.

Even if I wanted to, preserves are expensive. That is correct, some of them, which are more "lodges," shooting resorts that offer rooms, meals, open bars, bird cleaning, guides with dogs if you want, and all the rest, can be incredibly so. But... how much was The Trip going to cost us? How much did the dog cost; and your shotgun; and your gear; and the 4X4 we always buy to haul all our stuff around in?

See, almost all day-place preserves – the local pheasant farm, the sort I'm talking about here – charge on a per-released bird basis; but when we head out of state, we never, or rarely, compute the cost of a bird in the bag. The state of South Dakota figures that in 2006 a non-resident hunter typically spent an average of \$1,000 during his five-day stay, and I don't think that included the \$100-plus license. But let's say it did, and he shot his legally allowed 15 birds. The math says those birds cost \$66.66 each, and that's if Our Hero gets his limit; and that didn't figure in the cost of getting to and from the state – gas, food, maybe a motel room each way. The Trip's cost per bird, of course, has always been a closely guarded secret the guilty seldom share with She Who Is Angered When The Seat Is Left Up.

The Trip is also my vacation, a chance to get away and kick back with a couple buddies for a few days. A shooting preserve near home won't let me do that.

I didn't say preserves were a better choice than trips, just an option. On the other hand, spending five Saturdays in a row at a preserve won't burn five days of your vacation time, so you'll have those available to clean gutters and sweep out the garage!

There's something artificial about knowing that this 40-acre field has only six or eight pheasants in it that were released for me. There is, of course, the element of mystery that's missing from a preserve when compared with a wild-bird hunt, and that's a turnoff for a lot of people. It's something you can either accept and get on with it, work around, or it's too big a deal and ruins the experience. We

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each have to make that call. A lot of wingshooters, including a large percentage of those who read this magazine, get much of their shooting at preserves, so it can be done.

The birds are no challenge; they're too easy to hunt. Well, maybe, maybe not. Since they are released, they are not born and raised in that cover, so they don't know where to go to escape. And that means your normal strategies -- *Let's see, the sun's getting lower, so they've probably moved to feed* -- aren't going to work; the birds can be anywhere.

There are other pluses to a shooting preserve, some we don't think of very often and don't affect all of us. For example, when my older son Chris, just out of college, single, footloose, and cruising the country hunting several weeks a year, life was good (Jake got married in graduate school, but school was in South Dakota). After four or five years of that, Chris meets a girl way too good for him and gets married. No problem -- it was still off to Saskatchewan or the plains every year.

Then, after several years, comes Kid One followed by Kid Two. Those of you who have young children, and those who have older kids and total recall, know that they can be little magnets; missing and worrying about them can take a lot of fun out of a trip, especially after about the third day out; you want to go, but you don't want to be gone. Even if it isn't homesickness, sometimes it's hard to forsake the fatherly duties and stick your wife with 24/7 care of kids. I know one fellow who once traveled the world hunting -- until he and his wife adopted two very young children; several links came out of his chain instantaneously. If you are at this point in life, a preserve will get you home in time for dinner every night.

So far, I have been talking mainly about the local preserve, the kind I characterized earlier as a "pheasant farm," not in any derogatory sense, just not a destination someone would travel very far to visit. But there are, of course, destinations, most in the big pheasant states. They can vary widely in price and amenities, but if they've been in business a decade or so, they're going to know how to do the job. These places you'll have to travel for, and you'll pay to hunt, and many of them have released birds (though some specialize in wild birds), so to some hunters, they are the worst of all worlds. What they do have is pretty much guaranteed opportunities to work birds and privacy from competition. Almost all these places welcome your dog, too. These pheasant places have immense popularity with some people -- even during the heyday of CRP, many of them were booked solid all year, every year.

The first step up from the pheasant farm-type preserve are the small operators you'll find on the plains. These are mainly landowning farmers who allow pay hunting and may even have room and board available -- most of these seem to be wild-bird places, individuals taking advantage of the habitat CRP provides to grow a cash crop people will come from miles away to harvest. Unfortunately, many that have operated for years will have curtailed the hunting and turned much of their land to corn and soybeans.

Still others, as I mentioned, are major businesses that own their land and have first-class lodging and meals, such as



BEN G. WILLIAMS PHOTO

The future is pretty grim when it comes to CRP... but are you really going to quit hunting? Didn't think so.

10,000-acre Tumbleweed Lodge near Harrold, South Dakota, one of the finest outfits of its kind. At this point, it remains to be seen if the conversion of so much CRP acreage back to rowcrops is going to affect such operations, because many of them (though not Tumbleweed) lease the hunting rights to standing grass from nearby – and sometimes not so nearby – landowners.

Michael Bollweg is the co-owner and general manager of Tumbleweed, and he has his finger on the pulse of South Dakota bird hunting: “Farmers are reacting to the market and to their own expenses – diesel fuel is up, fertilizer is going through the roof, as well as the cost of equipment... some of the big tires our farm equipment require are going to China, so the price of those has gone up. [Besides not re-enrolling land in CRP], a small farmer takes a look at a twenty-acre

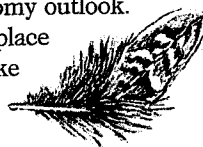
Preserves can run from a local game farm to a family landowner operation to a major business with extensive land holdings.

shelterbelt, figures he can make a thousand dollars an acre with a crop, knows he'll never run enough hunters through it to match that, so those trees come out.”

Bollweg feels that the hunting operations that have the best chance of continuing to succeed are those that own their own land and don't have to lease hunting ground, and also charge a high enough fee that what they get from hunting those acres is competitive with what they would get from farming them. “If the farming makes more than the hunting does, the farming's going to win.”

Most of Tumbleweed's acreage is devoted to agriculture with a strong emphasis on habitat, with the hunting a “value-added” proposition to the farming, he says. He also says that in the short term, there will be a lot of birds in South Dakota; but as farmers potentially pull walk-in acres out of the state access program to farm them, and as areas that used to shelter birds are cleared and cropped, the population may quickly bottom out.

In the final analysis, as pheasant hunters, we are in for a period of figuring out how to adapt to a gloomy outlook. But there are ways to brighten it. And one place to start is a shooting preserve, either one like Tumbleweed or a day place close to home. I'm pretty sure your dog won't mind.



A state-by-state listing of shooting preserves can be found at www.wingshootingusa.org. It's sponsored by the National Shooting Sports Foundation.